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## Lessons from Canada's Tobacco War

by *Lauren Walker*



As with many other health issues, trends in cigarette smoking show a world divided roughly along North-South lines. In developed countries that have introduced tobacco controls, tobacco consumption has dropped impressively. In the developing world, however, transnational tobacco companies (TTCs) are aggressively building growth opportunities in new markets.

The powerful TTCs use many tactics to permeate Southern markets. In *Smoke & Mirrors: The Canadian Tobacco War*, author [Rob Cunningham](#) documents these tactics as well as the coordinated efforts of antitobacco activists to save lives at risk. Cunningham has been active on tobacco issues for nearly a decade and is currently a senior policy analyst for the Canadian Cancer Society.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that about three million deaths — one every ten seconds — are caused by tobacco consumption each year. Despite steady declines in developed countries, tobacco consumption in "less developed countries" (LDCs) increased by nearly 2% in the 1980s. It continues to rise. If current smoking rates continue, an estimated 10 million deaths will occur by the year 2025 — seven million of these in LDCs.

Who is accountable? "The blame," according to Cunningham, "lies principally with the tobacco companies in the way they market their product and oppose efforts to reduce smoking." He also points to slack government regulations in many countries. "Part of the responsibility," he says, "lies with governments who have the means to reduce smoking or to prevent increases. The failure to take action is a factor." The research and statistics presented in Cunningham's book demonstrate how a fundamental human health issue has been consistently obscured by a smoke screen of corporate greed and politics.

**Increasing markets**

Five giants dominate the global tobacco industry. Over the past 30 years, TTCs have successfully increased their global market share by overstepping trade barriers and breaking down government monopolies. Since the 1960s, they have moved into countries in Latin America and Asia. In this decade they are gaining market share in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and in China and Viet Nam. Regions with growing populations, rising incomes, absence of tobacco regulation, and unorganized tobacco opposition are particularly vulnerable to aggressive marketing and advertising by multinational tobacco companies.

China, with 300 million smokers, is a good example of a new market frontier for TTCs. "Up until 1994," writes Cunningham, "the Chinese market was pretty well closed and dominated by the government monopoly. Less than 1% of cigarettes sold were imports." However, if China enters the World Trade Organization, the government will not be able to prevent the entry of foreign-made cigarettes. "The best thing the Chinese government can do," says Cunningham, "is to ban tobacco advertising to prevent foreign companies from furthering their sales."

While tobacco-industry apologists assert that their goal in advertising is merely to garner brand loyalty in the marketplace, Cunningham presents substantial evidence that TTCs continually strive to gain new consumers, especially among youth and women. As social and religious barriers dissolve and as disposable income among women increases, an enormous potential market for cigarette sales emerges.

A great deal of ingenuity goes into reaching potential markets around the world. Where tobacco advertising is restricted or prohibited altogether, TTCs find ways around these barriers. They promote their brands on cigarette lighters and rolling papers, sponsor cultural and sporting events or contests, and import clothing and other paraphernalia bearing cigarette brand logos. Where direct advertising is permitted, marketing activities are extremely aggressive. "Television ads," says Cunningham, "convey incredible images of glamour, sexual attractiveness, status, romance and wealth — aspirations which for many people in less developed countries will never be realized."

### **Dubious economics**

Tobacco industry leaders argue that tobacco benefits a nation's economy by creating jobs and providing tax revenue. Cunningham does recognize that tobacco can be a lucrative crop. But he points to many hidden costs in tobacco farming. Pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizer are not only expensive, they can be dangerous to human health and the environment if not handled properly.

Cunningham argues that when it comes to choosing how to spend family income, tobacco competes with food in some countries. In poorer economies, cash that would otherwise be spent on food often goes up in smoke on cigarettes. A 1981 Bangladesh study found the cost of consuming only five cigarettes per day could lead to a monthly dietary deficit for a poor household of approximately 8,000 calories.

Tobacco is often farmed in rotation with maize and other food crops. One source cited in *Smoke & Mirrors* estimates that tobacco uses land that could otherwise grow enough to feed between 10 and 20 million people.

Tobacco production is also bad for the environment. "Deforestation is a big concern," explains Cunningham. "For cigarette paper alone, an estimated 350,000 tonnes of paper are used each year around the world." A common method of curing tobacco requires high temperatures for extended periods. In LDCs, the heat source is most likely wood burning. Cunningham cites a 1986 study that notes an average of 7.8 kilograms of wood are used to cure one kilogram of tobacco.

### **Controlling Tobacco**

Only 10 countries in the world have implemented comprehensive tobacco-control strategies. Among these countries, Thailand and Singapore are the only emerging economies that have done so. Strategies that work

in developed countries may be less appropriate in some LDCs. For example, high rates of illiteracy mean that health warnings on packaging may be useless for reaching large parts of certain populations. "There isn't any one measure that will eliminate tobacco use," says Cunningham. "A comprehensive package that includes health warnings, smoking restrictions in workplaces and public places, higher tobacco taxes, advertising restrictions, and public education campaigns is necessary for maximum impact."

And while governments in some countries might argue that they do not have the resources to pay for antitobacco campaigns, Cunningham points out that much can be done at no cost. "You don't need a budget to ban tobacco advertising," he says. "And warnings on packaging are paid for by tobacco companies." "Furthermore," he states, "increasing tobacco taxes is one of the most effective methods of reducing smoking and, at the same time, increasing government revenues."

Cunningham believes that Canada provides a good role model for tobacco control. "We have implemented measures that have worked. We can share our own experiences, assist other countries in drafting tobacco laws, and provide information on how to combat strategies employed by the industry."

Many international organizations assist in global tobacco control and regional organizations for tobacco control exist in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Since it adopted its first resolution on tobacco and health in 1970, WHO has urged governments around the world to take action in this area. The World Bank no longer gives financial support to tobacco production, and will help countries diversify into crops other than tobacco. The Food and Agricultural Organization, previously an active promoter of tobacco growing, no longer encourages its production. IDRC is currently coordinating the International Tobacco Initiative in response to the rapid rise in tobacco consumption and production throughout the South.

While there are many battles still to be fought, the war on tobacco is not yet lost. But for Cunningham, timing is crucial. For the work of the antitobacco lobby to be effective, tobacco-control programs need to be put in place before local tobacco companies gain experience fighting regulatory efforts and before TTCs further dominate emerging markets.

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## Links to explore ...

[\*Smoke & Mirrors: The Canadian Tobacco War\*](#) by Rob Cunningham. IDRC November 1996. 372 pp. ISBN 0-88936-755-8 CA\$25.00

[Tobacco or Health Programme](#) (WHO)

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ISSN 0315-9981. This magazine is listed in the Canadian Magazine Index.

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